DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 322 UD 034 535

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TITLE Principals' Struggle To Level the Accountability Playing Field of Florida Graded "D" and "F" Schools in High Poverty and Minority Communities.
PUB DATE 2001-04-00
NOTE 33p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Accountability; Administrator Attitudes; Administrator Role; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; High Stakes Tests; *Leadership; *Minority Group Children; *Poverty; *Principals; School Effectiveness; State Legislation; State Standards; Teacher Persistence; Teacher Recruitment
IDENTIFIERS *Florida

ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions of Florida principals from failing high poverty/minority schools regarding accountability measures placed upon their schools by state legislation. Data collection included field notes, observations, and interviews regarding principals' impressions of the state's accountability system, how their role was influenced by the system, and how they negotiated internal and external accountability. Four themes emerged: effects of poverty on teaching and learning, building organizational capacity, high stakes testing, and recruitment and retention of teachers. Principals felt they faced continual pressure to improve student performance and meet state and district mandates while supporting teachers and students. They believed their everyday problems were very different from those of peers in less diverse schools. Principals were not against Florida's standards or accountability but rather the inequity of using high stakes testing to compare students with different needs when grading schools. They believed they needed more time to raise student achievement levels. They recognized that their schools concentrated on short-term change due to the urgency of improving their failing grades. Principals felt threatened by mandates from the top. They reported losing teachers to other professions and schools because of poor teaching conditions. They fought districts for more teachers to reduce class size. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Principals' Struggle to Level the Accountability Playing Field of Florida Graded "D" and "F" Schools in High Poverty and Minority Communities

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A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association Seattle, Washington
April, 2001

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Introduction

There has been an emerging field of study over the last 30 years looking at schools that defy the odds by exceeding state expectations of performance with low socio-economic students and students of color. The most recent literature (usually funded by foundations such as the Heritage or Pew Foundations or the Department of Education) builds upon the body of research begun in the 70s that looked at the characteristics and practices of effective schools (e.g. see Edmonds, Lezotte, Purkey & Smith). Most recently, the Heritage Foundation published a report entitled, "No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High Poverty Schools," written by Samuel Casey Carter (2000). Another study made available through The Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin is, "Hope for Urban Education: A Study of Nine High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Elementary Schools" (1999). Both of these multi-site, multi-case studies report the stories of educators in schools that have made significant reversals in the achievement patterns of students from high poverty, minority environments.

Now these studies do several things for educators. Not only do they point out that all students can learn, but they also suggest that the time it takes varies significantly. Additionally, they note that the school leaders and staff play a significant role in impacting the achievement patterns of their students. But most importantly, these studies benefit educators by telling them stories about the present practices of high performing high poverty/minority schools, noting common themes for school improvement that these schools share. The assumption is that other schools, which serve high poverty and minority students, can see similarities in the stories and also begin to make a commitment to alter their achievement patterns and practices with students in their schools.

What is less well understood, however, is how principals in struggling schools work to improve their schools. We have case studies about principals and their staffs who have altered their instructional practices and embraced whole school development, but what about the principals who are in low performing schools who are trying desperately to improve their practices. This study examines how principals in low performing, and high poverty/minority schools are resisting the labels of low performance and attempting to level the accountability playing fields for their schools by improving externally, to meet one state's accountability plan, and internally, by addressing their school's organizational capacity (Newmann et. al, 1997). By interviewing ten principals from schools labeled as failing schools, we hoped to glean a better understanding of how these principals are balancing the external accountability mandates of high stakes testing from one state, while addressing the internal needs of their schools. The *Florida System of School Improvement and Accountability* provides the framework for understanding the external context of accountability, while the principals' stories of their struggles present how they address the internal development of their schools.

Florida System of School Improvement and Accountability: An Overview

School-based accountability has been a driving reform in the state of Florida since 1991. With some of the largest school districts nationally, Florida's reform has run parallel to national trends over the last 10 to 15 years such as raising academic standards, adopting decentralized authority structures, systemic redesign, more criterion-referenced testing, increased concern over parent and community involvement, and outcries for more public accountability through the publication of individual school performance ratings (Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 1997, p.14).

Blueprint 2000: A System of School Improvement and Accountability was developed and approved in 1991 as the educational policy of Florida. This legislation identified seven state goals, mandated the individual school as the basic site of accountability, and introduced the development of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) (Blueprint 2000, A System of School Improvement and Accountability, 1992). The first school improvement plans were due at the end of the 1992-93 school year and were first implemented in the 1993-94 school year. All schools in Florida's 67 counties annually assess their school's status in relation to the state's seven goals, identify school goals and standards that reflect the needs of the local school community, set priorities, and re-develop their school's improvement plan.

As many states have turned to standards to improve student learning, Florida not only developed and implemented a standards-driven reform, but has also designed a performance-based assessment, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) to assess students' progress on reading and math standards. The latest information on statewide standards and accountability is that forty-nine states now have statewide academic standards for what students should know and be able to do in at least some subjects; 50 states test how well their students are learning; and 27 hold schools accountable for results, whether by rating student performance of all the schools or identifying low-performing schools (Quality Counts 2001, 2001). The state of Florida developed state standards (known as Sunshine State Standards (SSS) in seven content areas: Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Foreign Languages, Fine Arts, and Physical Education and Health) and school districts began implementing the Standards in the1996-97 school year. FCAT, measuring student progress in reading and math standards, was first used for accountability measures for the school year 1998-99, and testing on science standards is to be implemented in 2003.

Prior to the 1998-99 school year, actual reporting of school performance was accomplished through identifying low performing schools as "critically low" – Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools. During the 1999 Florida Legislative session, the A+ Education Plan was passed which focused on rewarding schools that showed progress, rewarding teachers with students showing progress, and improving teacher preparation and continual professional development. A specific part of the Plan that has caused a great deal of controversy is how schools are now identified for student performance. Using the

familiar letter scale ranging from "A" through "F" (high performing to low performing), schools are given grades based on 4th, 5th, 8th, and 10th grade students' performance in reading, writing, and math on Florida's high-stakes test, the FCAT, along with other school criteria. Beginning 2000-01 school year, the state will expand the testing system and begin testing all 3rd through 10th graders.

To further complicate the issue of grading schools, economic rewards are attached to school grades; a high performing school earns $100 per student for high student scores on the FCAT. This has resulted in school leaders in high performing schools being thrust into the role of deciding, with their faculties and school advisory councils, how to spend thousands of dollars. Whereas principals in low performing schools are not rewarded in any way for any kind of progress, but are faced with determining which of their teachers earn money for teaching at a "D" or "F" graded school (monetary incentive for veteran teachers who have stayed in this type of school). Although rewarding teachers is a positive move for the state, it seems the way it has been presented is tearing faculties apart, lowering morale, and resulting in teachers leaving low graded schools for higher graded schools. Many say that it is just the teachers from low performing schools that are against the grading system. That is not totally true. Six elementary teachers from an "A" graded school district in southwest Florida, in an effort to protest the system of cash rewards and the misuse of the FCAT to grade schools, traveled to Tallahassee to return the bonus checks to Governor Bush. Their message was, "that relying on the test to judge schools ignores the relation between socio-economics and test scores" (Examiner, 2001). Other high performing schools have protested the reward plan by giving the money to schools that needed help. The state, in an effort to recruit and retain teachers to teach in low performing schools, is providing teaching incentives for forgivable loans up to $13,000 for teachers who agree to teach for at least two years after they graduate in schools graded "D" or "F," or at least three years at another public school. And schools that are graded "D" or "F," under the state grading system, can offer bonuses of up to $3500 to recruit or retain outstanding teachers (Quality Counts 2001: Florida Policy Update, 2001).

Florida, comprised of 67 counties, has 3,044 schools that educate 2.4 million Pre-K-12 students. Of that student population, 45% are minority, 21.9% live in poverty, and 14.6% have disabilities (Quality Counts 2001: Florida Policy Update, 2001). Since 1995, the first year Florida schools were identified as low performing, schools were steadily making progress. In 1995 there were 158 schools identified as critically low; in 1996 there were 71 schools; in 1997, 30 schools were identified; and in 1998, there were only 4 critically low schools identified in the state. With the passing of the A+ Plan in 1999, schools were given grades to identify both high performing and low performing schools. In 1999, there were 78 schools graded "F" and 613 schools graded "D". In 2000, those numbers were greatly reduced to four schools graded "F" and 397 schools graded "D". It is interesting to note that of the four schools graded "F"; none of them are from the original 78 in 1999. Schools graded "A" have nearly tripled over the last two years increasing form 203 schools to 579 schools (FASA Meeting, 2000). It is important to observe that the schools that are most often graded as a "D" or "F" also tend to be located in high poverty and high minority areas. In a study conducted by the Miami-Dade County

School System to determine possible indicators of low performing schools, high percentages of free and reduced lunch and mobility were the biggest predictors of low performing schools (Jianguo, 1999).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of principals from high poverty/minority schools in regard to the accountability measures that have been thrust upon the schools as a result of state legislation, *Florida's System of School Improvement and Accountability*."

This study examines principal leadership as it relates to external and internal graded accountability. The objectives of this study were: (1) to understand how principals' view themselves as leaders under the graded system, particularly within high poverty/minority school contexts, and (2) to explore how the graded designations impact principals' professional identities and relationships with various role groups.

High Stakes Testing, Performance, and Poverty: A Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study pulls from the literature on (a) high stakes testing and assessment, (b) low and high performing/minority schools, and (c) a framework for understanding poverty (Payne, 1998). We begin by drawing attention to Neumann et al.'s (1997) lens for accountability that distinguishes between external and internal accountability processes and building organizational capacity. *External* accountability is defined as performance on criterion and norm-referenced tests, *internal* accountability is defined as teacher input, knowledge construction, and the connection between the school and authentic, real world learning, and organizational capacity is defined as the ability to sustain change from within the organization (e.g. site-based decision making, shared governance, and school wide collaboration). In studying restructuring schools, the authors found that what distinguished a successful restructured school from one that was less successful was the extent to which the school had developed their organizational capacity. Although many schools were effective in restructuring and had developed their own internal accountability processes, without developing organizational capacity, these schools were not as responsive and successful in meeting the external demands of the environment as schools that had developed their organizational capacity.

To understand the national push for accountability and assessment practices, Linn (2000) suggests four appealing characteristics to this reform. First, tests are an economical alternative to other reforms. Second, testing can be externally mandated, making it easier than making substantive and lasting changes in the classroom. Third, testing mandates can be implemented rapidly, making their implementation possible within the term of an office. Fourth, results are visible and can be used to demonstrate positive changes in school performance, pointing to the success of the policies of a particular political party in achieving school improvements. Although accountability and assessment hold appeal, there is criticism from educators and policy makers regarding the employment of tests as

the primary accountability tool to mete out significant rewards or punishments with poor and minority students. Kohn (2000), a staunch opponent of standardized /high stakes testing warns that there are some indisputable facts on the use of standardized high-stakes testing that must be acknowledged. Among those facts is that non-instructional factors explain most of the variance among test scores when schools and districts are compared. Citing a study of math results of the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Kohn reports that the combination of four variables: number of parents at home, parents' educational background, type of community, and poverty rate accounted for 89% of the difference in state scores. Armed with this information, many professional organizations have condemned the use of a single test (i.e., standardized high-stakes test) as the basis for making important decisions, such as graduation or promotion on the results from one test. Third, (Kohn states he only has anecdotal evidence), many educators are leaving the field because of what is being done in schools in the name of "accountability" and "tougher standards."

The literature on improving low performing schools identifies raising expectations, rapid improvement in quality of teaching, and strengthening on-site leadership skills as the key elements to the improvement process (Commission of the States, 1998; Stoll & Myers, 1998; Wolk, 1998). Low performing schools, often described as failing schools, are places where students perform below state standards/expectations typically in reading, writing, and math. Understanding differences in social class, mediated by race, becomes central to the debate around social and student problems of student performance and achievement (cf. Anyon, 1997; Coleman, 1966; Ogbu, 1991 who offer different interpretations for why this is true).

Ironically low performing and failing schools are often found in the poorest neighborhoods, where children are mostly black, Hispanic, or immigrants, not proficient in English (Wolk, 1998). Studies indicate that frequently high poverty/minority schools focus more on selecting professional development programs that relate to diversity or minority issues rather than on curriculum and instruction that increases teacher knowledge and skill (Sparks, 2000). Payne (1998) argues that schools must provide students from poverty support in the form of cognitive strategies, appropriate relationships, coping strategies, goal setting opportunities, and suitable instruction both in content and discipline. She states, "The true discrimination that comes out of poverty is the lack of cognitive strategies" (p. 13).

Payne (1998) further adds that poverty is not just about the lack of financial resources. She defines it as "the extent to which an individual does without resources" (p. 16). There are eight resources that comprise her framework of poverty and they are *financial*, *emotional*, *mental*, *spiritual*, *physical*, *support systems*, *relationships/role models*, and *knowledge of hidden rules*. Payne explains that financial resources do not describe a person's ability to leave poverty; rather, the other resources are much more instrumental in the success of the person to make a life transition. For example, *emotional resources* refer to having the tenacity to hang on, to stick with something, particularly when learning new rules (leaving one set of values e.g. poverty for another set --the middle class). *Mental resources* include access to informational resources through knowledge of

reading and writing. *Spiritual resources* call into place a higher power for renewed hope and optimism about the future. *Physical resources* require a body that is capable and healthy. A *support system* avails a person to the resources of others to help with things like baby-sitting as well as opening up knowledge bases for access into college, completing a math assignment etc. *Relationships/role models* emulate how to live life emotionally in a healthy and productive way. And last, the *knowledge of hidden rules* opens up information about unspoken rules that a person needs to fit into different environments. Payne concludes, "Generally, in order to successfully move from one class to the next, it is important to have a spouse or mentor from the class to which you wish to move to model and teach you the hidden rules" (p. 18).

High performing, high poverty schools have all of the same demographic characteristics of low performing, high poverty/minority schools. The following strategies were cited as assisting the schools in their dramatic turnarounds: (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999).

- Educational leaders achieved a visible attainable first goal,
- Educational leaders redirected the time and energy spent on conflicts between adults toward meeting the needs of students,
- School leaders fostered collective responsibility for school improvement through joint planning processes and engaging everyone in the work,
- Time spent on instructional leadership activities increased,
- Educators aligned instruction to the standards and assessments required by the state or the school district and spent time meeting to go over understanding exactly what students needed to know how to do,
- School leaders got resources for training that teachers perceived they needed, and then provided teachers with adequate materials,
- School leaders created time for teacher collaboration so that it became an important part of the school day,
- Educators made efforts to win the confidence of parents, first by improving student achievement, and then by getting parents to support student achievement,
- School leaders created additional time for instruction in the school day or beyond the regular day, and
- School leaders persisted through difficulties, setbacks, and challenges (p. 2).

Casey (1999) found there were seven common elements of high-performing, high-poverty schools which were: (1) the principals must be free to decide how to spend their money, whom to hire, and what to teach, (2) principals use measurable goals to establish a culture of achievement, (3) master teachers bring out the best in faculty and they often head peer evaluations, lead team teaching, devise internal assessment measures, and keep the school focused on academic achievement, (4) rigorous and regular testing leads to continuous student achievement, (5) achievement is the key to discipline, (6) principals work actively with parents to make the home the center of learning, and (7) effort creates ability (pp. 5-8).

The work of turning a high poverty school around is challenging. In a report prepared for the Department of Education (1994) entitled, "Implementing Schoolwide Projects: An Idea Book for Educators," several conclusions were drawn which are central to making positive changes. First, the organizational/management focus and the academic focus of the school must work in tandem. Second, the planning and design for school improvement should be focused and unified in a singular direction. Third, there should be an increased emphasis on professional development that engages teachers in collaboration, and lastly, parent and community partnership must be strengthened.

Method and Data Sources

The method for the study is a case study. This particular study is part of a larger qualitative and ethnographic study planned over several years to examine the social, institutional, economic, cultural, attitudinal, and organizational factors in high poverty/minority, low performing schools. We began this investigation with 10 principals in schools graded "D" and "F." Informal data collection began several years ago while working with these principals providing professional development. During this time, we began taking field notes and worked to establish relationships with these principals. Our interviews, conducted over a period of several months, with over 90 hours of transcriptions, were coded and analyzed using a phenomenological approach like that of Graumann (1994), who views the everyday experiences of these participants (principals) as the starting point to discover the themes in participant language and experiences. As Graumann said, "we let...our subjects spell out the problems from their perspective, and above all, in their own words" (p. 286). This paper reports the findings from the initial interviews conducted with principals.

Data sources were semi-structured interviews, our field notes, and observations. We established trustworthiness through individual member checks with all participants, researcher debriefings after each interview, and arrived at agreement on all the codes and categories. We followed the steps outlined in Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Miles and Huberman (1994). First, we identified the units of information in the transcripts. Second, we agreed upon several working categories to locate the specific units. And third, we grouped together the categories to identify major subthemes across all the interviews, lastly combining the subthemes into major themes.

Participants

Because of the sensitive nature of these interviews, and in order to insure confidentiality to our participants, we report the findings across themes and subthemes. We chose not to give specific information about the schools or the principals, but rather to give general descriptions about the demographics of these schools and districts. All of these principals are experienced elementary school principals, many of whom have given their lives to improve the educational opportunities for the children in their schools. The ethnic background of the principals is white, African American, and Hispanic; and the gender make-up is one male and nine female principals. The principals' schools are in west central and southeast Florida.

Research Question

The overall research question for this study was, "What are principals' views toward the state's accountability measures in reference to their schools, their roles, and what, if any, effect has external accountability had on internal accountability in developing the organizational capacity of the school?

Interview Protocol

Below is the interview protocol used with the principals:

1) Tell me about your impressions of the state's accountability system.
   a) How does this system affect your specific school?
   b) How do the demographics and needs of your school influence your meeting the requirements of the state's accountability criteria?

2) Tell me how your role has been influenced as a result of the state's present accountability system.
   a) How has your role in interacting with teachers been influenced by the new accountability system? (with parents?) (with district leadership?)

3) Tell me how you negotiate the internal accountability of your school (defined as meeting students' needs through schoolwide collaboration, teacher input, knowledge construction, and the connection between the school and authentic, real-world learning) and external accountability (defined as performance on norm and criterion referenced tests (e.g. FCAT)).
   a) How do you and your staff address the internal needs of your school in relation to the state's accountability measures?
   b) How does your school improvement plan address the needs of your students and the state's accountability requirements?
   c) What are some of the major conflicts you face in changing the grade of your school?
      - What are the factors that contribute to your school grade?
      - How do they contribute to your school grade?

Findings

Four themes emerged from the interviews that help us better understand how principals are addressing the external accountability and the internal accountability of their school's development over time (1) effects of poverty, (2) building organizational capacity, (3) high stakes testing: grading the schools, and (4) recruitment and retention. The first theme is effects of poverty.

Effects of Poverty on Teaching and Learning

The theme the effects of poverty emerged in all ten interviews with the principals. Poverty is clearly indicated in the demographic patterns of the schools, most particularly the number of students on free and reduced lunch, the high mobility rates, and the low academic achievement scores. But poverty is intertwined with how principals see the parents and students. "Their number one goal is to survive, to have basic needs met." Principals are also aware of the differences between generational and situational poverty. One principal describes generational poverty this way. "It's the white children that I serve that are really having a problem. It is generational poverty--mom and dad were poor, so were grandma and grandpa, great-grandma and great-grandpa... So consequently, there is no one in the home that works..." Another principal says,

> What happens is, if you get into abject poverty and disparity and it's a matter of survival, the soul is broken. If the soul is broken and you don't have the idea that you are going to get out from under it, then that's the way you will probably be the rest of your life. You're not very optimistic about the future, and you don't give that to your children--let them know there is a better future.

Throughout the interviews the principals talk about the effects of poverty on four areas: first, the *demographic patterns* mentioned above, second, the *language barriers and deficits* students bring to school, third, the *degree of parental support*, and fourth, the *cultural and socio-economic value differences*. These four subthemes examine the challenges principals perceive in meeting external accountability, meeting the internal accountability of their schools, and building capacity. The hidden subtext to poverty is the associated at-risk factors of school failure (e.g. school drop-outs, teen pregnancy, absenteeism, frequent tardiness, school aggression, and lack of meaning of an education), which these principals face daily.

Demographic Patterns

The principals note the trends of high numbers of free and reduced lunch percentages in their schools. Most of the schools were in excess of 90% of the students on free and reduced lunch, and one school had close to a 100% of its students on free and reduced lunch. There were, however, several schools that only had about 60% of their students on free and reduced lunch. The mobility rates were also high in these schools. Mobility rates varied from 40 to 85%. Further, these schools were made up of students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds (e.g. Haitian Creole, African American, Jamaican, Caucasian, Hispanic-- from Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba, and Columbia). Most principals knew where the pockets of low performance were across the State "...I've looked at the school grades. You can pick out pockets of the state and where the pockets of high poverty students are is where you have the lowest performing students. And it seems

really easy to figure out what's going on here, but apparently, it's not." (This principal is referring to the relationship of poverty and performance on the state test. State legislators seem surprised at this correlation.)

The demographic patterns hint at some of the more serious problems principals talk about which lay beneath the surface of these demographic statistics. Frequently, children from these lower socio-economic homes lack the resources and opportunities to come to school ready to learn at the same rates as their more affluent peers. "Certainly the students at our school don't come to school with the same readiness skills that many students in other schools (having pre-reading skills), or having the experiences ...that really affects their progress in school. When children have not been read to and children haven't had the experiences with traveling and going to different places, and [the lack of] parental input certainly affects their performance in school." Another principal says, "There's no such thing as telling the kid to find a quiet place at home to read when there are 11 children and two adults in a two-bedroom house."

Principals convey feeling constantly behind in trying to get children from high poverty environments where they need to be. Specifically, principals explain how they use their school funds to provide access to books and materials. Further, principals describe how often times parents do not take advantage of community services provided. These services may be located at the schools or in various other agency locations. Principals are concerned about the reasons why parents may not avail themselves of these resources and suggest several reasons why this may be true. First, the parents may not know about the school's willingness to assist them in procuring additional resources. And second, the agencies that provide support to parents may not offer services at times convenient to the parents' availability. For example, migrant parents who might choose to go to the health clinic might have to give up a whole day's wages. This is exceedingly costly to a high poverty family. Rather, the clinics might adjust their times of operation to accommodate the families, or go directly into the communities because transportation is a problem. Thus demographic variables are indicative of being in communities with limited resources "And if you look at the demographics of my neighborhood, it is not going to get any better because it is older homes where the families built them in the 40s and 50s and they were blue collar workers. Over the years, they [families] have moved out and the homes have fallen into disrepair. Most of them are monthly rentals now and people can move in and out; we do get a lot of that and we are not migrant."

Most principals agree that they cannot control the environmental factors that poor students bring to school. "We cannot control the attitudes that the community has toward those children. We can't control their economic status, but we can improve it and provide them with the academic materials they need at home. We can make some inroads..."

Language Barriers and Deficits

"Sixty percent of our students are of Hispanic background, and fifty percent of our entering kindergarteners speak little to no English." This is common for many of these schools. The students are classified as limited or non-English speakers. So educators

struggle with poor students who don't speak English. This impacts the schools all the way through the 5th grade. So even though the children acquire the language orally, they still have deficits in the written words. Regardless of their race or language, the poor students come to the schools language deprived. Although many of the parents do not speak English, the majority of the poor parents also do not read or write proficiently in their native language. All the same, the language barriers are further complicated when students who are not proficient in their native language orally, or in the written word, return to their non-English speaking homes where parents are unable to assist them in their work in English and travel back to their native homelands where they do not speak English at all.

One principal relates a story of how the staff at her school thought that the problems with school achievement were directly related to non-English speaking students. On the contrary, when the principal disaggregated the data for the different groups, (e.g. Hispanic, African American, and Caucasian), the truth was that none of the groups were performing well. This forced the staff to look at the language deficits of all the students they were serving.

Several principals portray how frustrating the language barriers can be, especially when the state requires the schools to test the students after only two years of language acquisition. Principals feel this is an unfair expectation for non-English speaking students to take the tests after such a short time. But not all principals agree with this. One principal expresses the sooner the students learn what is expected from them, the better off they will be—their school does not exempt students from the testing the first two years. She explains that a student's success depends on their use of language—they will have to fill our job applications in English and become part of the mainstream

Our ability to use language to express what we know often mirrors what we have been exposed to in our environment. Thus language opens up a way of communicating our experiences. Not only are the poor students behind in their language acquisition, but also in their repertoire of experiences. One principal says, "They are coming to us with an experiential academic deficit. They may have many rich experiences in family love, and they're very loving and very caring, and we never measure those things. We measure the academics...they're not playing on a level playing field." Another principal relates how the word Conestoga wagon was an enigma to her students. She explains that other children may not know what the word means either, but that through their greater experiential reservoirs, they can figure it out.

Interestingly, several of the principals portray how growing up as a minority and poor person shaped their views about life. One principal remarks that even though he attended a segregated school, the teachers and his parents were supportive of education and saw it as the way out. Expectations for speaking English appropriately were high so that the students could become part of the mainstream. Teachers worked hard to assist students in gaining the understanding of what they would need to be successful in middle class America. Another principal grew up in a migrant home. She says that her mother held high expectations for all of her children and saw education as the opportunity to break out

of the migrant cycle. Even though English was spoken, learning the rules of standard English was a necessity to gain access a middle class life.

Parental Support

Most principals agree that parents that are poor are limited in their ability to help because they do not have the capacity or sometimes the language to understand how to be of assistance. Principals state that parents will come to school if their children are performing, but they will not come to hear about a reading program. One principal relates a story about a third grader who told her that her mama did not want to see any more of her math papers. When the principal spoke to the mother later, she told the mother that there was a wad of math papers in her daughter's desk. The principal asked the mother about helping her daughter with her homework and finally the mother shared she had never learned how to do fractions in school. The principal inferred the mother was embarrassed and pretended indifference to her daughter's requests for help. The daughter got tired of asking her mother for help that was not forthcoming.

Principals talk seriously about what they can do to encourage parents to come to school, such as supplying baby-sitters, feeding them, and offering transportation. Nevertheless, in most instances the parental support and involvement is low. One principal said that she felt that it was just plain trickery trying to get some of these parents to come to school. She related that when parents are just trying to survive, and wondering how they are going to pay the rent, make repairs on the car, and pay for medical expenses, that learning about a new reading program or helping their child with homework, is not their top priority. Instead she talked about doing a lot of counseling with parents about their day-to-day concerns and telling them how important it is to support their child's education.

Cultural and Socio-Economic Value Differences

Poverty shapes the way you see the world. One principal describes differences in the value placed on work ethic below:

> So many of my homes, nobody gets up and goes to work everyday, and if they do get a job, they don't think a thing about calling in sick, or if they slept late, not going into work today, or it's raining, so I am not going in today. They don't have what it takes to keep putting one foot in front of the other...like you would see in middle class home. You might wake up with a headache, but you are going to work anyway...I had a little boy who missed 28 days this year because his mom didn't have a car and she couldn't wake him up in time to get him to the bus. And we went out there, went out there, and went out there, and they didn't have a phone so we couldn't call them and wake them up in the morning...You know people don't understand, these homes don't have alarm clocks, or they do and they don't set them, or they set them and they turn them off.

There are also different values about cleanliness. Principals report the kids are dirty. "I have kids who come to school filthy dirty." When you go their homes their moms are dirty; their houses are dirty. You send the health department out to have someone instruct the mom on cleaning her house. And then when you think about it, this mother is cleaner than her mother was.

There are just so many differences in the values of poor parents, especially when you think about the value of getting an education. When the parents think they have fared decent enough without an education, meaning they are surviving, then why do their kids need an education. When you think about middle class values, the reason you get an education is to get a good job and have a better life. "I have so many parents who say, 'Well, I dropped out of school in the eighth grade; well, I got pregnant when I was in the seventh grade; I did fine…" "I've got a mom right now that wants a fifth grader to stay home and baby-sit because if she doesn't feel good or she needs to go to work or something, she can't see the little girl needs an education so she doesn't end up like she is. She thinks she is doing fine. .." "I had a kindergartner who missed 38 days of school…[When we asked the mom,] "Why don't you have her in school? Well, she has head lice." Rather than spend one day to get her daughter treated, the mother said she had a new baby and she did not always get up on time or have time to pick all of those lice out. The principal lamented that the parent was teaching her daughter it was fine to stay at home from school.

Another value that differs from middle class values is the aggression of parents and the violence children witness at home and in their neighborhoods. One principal recalls a mother who did not work. All of her four children were on free and reduced lunch. Yet, according to this principal, the mother had taken her four children to buy four gold chains. One of her children had the chain broken at school and the mother wanted the person who broke the chain to buy a new one, not just fix it. Yet this mother, according to the principal, does not buy her children books or take them to museums. The mother used abusive language with the principal to make her demands known.

Aggression is part of what kids see at home as one principal comments:

> [C]hildren would see their parents/uncles being shot or knifed, or see fighting; the children assumed that the way to handle conflict was through hitting or fighting. So, we had a significant amount of students with discipline problems because of fighting. I used to look at them and say, 'Okay, I understand.' Here is a student who truly has a dual environment: one at school where we are talking about conflict management, and then when he gets out into the community he best know how to fight because if he doesn't, he's going to be beat on. He carries that attitude onto the school and there's a constant conflict. So, that has a lot also to do with schools that come from communities like this.

Several principals report the fact that parents come on campus and cuss out teachers, threaten them, and yell at other children. Principals often are left to write letters to these

parents, involve the local authorities, and build the morale of their teachers who have been verbally assaulted.

Another value difference principals mention is parents in poverty do not read the newspapers or listen to the news. Instead, their sources of information according to these principals are often Oprah, Jerry Springer, and other talk shows. Principals try to communicate with parents through a variety of means, however they are not sure about the success of their efforts. Often principals employ bilingual staff to call the parents, write to the parents in a journal that goes home each night in Spanish, and engage interpreters for parent conferences. Notwithstanding, principals state that there is a silent language of poverty difficult for an interpreter to translate and for them to understand. Several principals suggested that their staffs needed to develop a greater understanding of the issues of poverty and be more sensitive to the struggles these parents and their children face daily.

Building Organizational Capacity

The second theme is building organizational capacity. Many of the principals recognize that it is critical to build the organizational capacity of the school to move it forward. For a number of reasons, the principals will acknowledge that this is their greatest challenge. The subthemes for this theme are (a) *It Takes a Whole School,* (b) *Changing Instructional Practices,* and (c) *The Principal's Beliefs and Values.* One principal asserts that to turn a school around, " ...I feel the entire faculty plays a role in setting the tone for what's expected at their school. It's from the principal down, and one should say from the students to the teachers up."

It Takes the Whole School

Most principals believe that holding teachers and students to standards is a good thing. Whether principals articulate that it takes the whole school to achieve at higher levels varies in their responses. Some principals are very explicit, "it takes a whole school mindset," "we are in this together," while other principals discuss how they put team structures in place to encourage individual teachers to share their practices, at first within their teams, and then with the school at-large. There are, however, some principals that focus on the programs that will move their schools forward like Success For All, Cooperative Learning Groups, Bridges Program etc., as well as the resources from the math specialist, reading specialist, and writing specialist.

Principals recognize that without the whole school looking at their practices in relation to standards, the curriculum will be fragmented. Teachers will feel the onus of responsibility for student achievement at the grade levels where testing occurs. Thus principals' examine and share performance patterns across the entire school to begin the initial conversation for whole school development to occur. This practice also informs the way students are grouped, both across grade levels and within grade levels. For example, a school might have reading instruction across an entire school at a specific time during the day, as well as math instruction, to allow for more flexible grouping. In one school the

principal was engaged in a schoolwide effort to assist students with their writing. Ad hoc groups met in the school cafeteria, and each teacher and support person worked with a different group of students on a writing prompt. When students made progress, they immediately went to the next higher level.

Keeping a "close watch" on the group dynamics of the different teams of teachers is part of developing the whole school. The availability of the principal to teachers is seen as important. One principal states that she truly had an open door policy. Like my mom told me years ago when a child says there is a ghost in the closet, and you know there's not, don't argue. Look in the closet and reassure the child there is no ghost, and then s/he will be fine. It is the same thing with teachers. Sometimes, they need someone to just listen to them and they will be fine. Another principal said, "You show people that you are willing to work with them, and you are willing to support them. You are willing to go down that road with them, and you hope that by the end of that trail that you have the majority of them with you..."

Principals feel the challenge of getting teachers to see "that we've got to do two things at one time—we've got to get beyond the "D," but we've also got to build from kindergarten up, a program that will keep us from becoming a "D" in the future."

Principals talked about insuring that there is time to dialogue with the teachers. Some principals institute a monthly planning day for every grade level to plan and examine the issues they are facing, and to plan and review the grade level expectations for all students. Other principals have teachers come to school before pre-planning to jump-start the process by focusing teachers on this year's areas for school improvement.

There was concern expressed, however, about the fact that there are teachers in some of the schools who do not believe all children can learn. One principal characterizes this teacher attitude as an uphill battle to school improvement. "Unfortunately, there are members of this staff that do not believe that all children can learn and they very openly will state—well, they just can't do any better."

Working to develop the whole school translates into building different relationships with parents. Educators help make parents aware of the standards and the expectations the school has for their children and how these have changed over time with standards-driven assessment. Because of this, parents are becoming more attuned to the consequences of not having their child on grade level. One principal comments that this has been positive—"not only do we have to educate our students, but we have to educate our parents. We hold two monthly meetings and bring in different areas of curriculum into focus for parents, letting them know how they can help their children in those areas."

One principal shares that she was talking to her teachers the other day about the school improvement plan.

> See I don't want people to give us plans that are all glory with all these strategies, and then you get in the classroom and start doing the same old

> thing...So I was talking to the faculty yesterday, I was sharing with them that I would like us to go back and take a look at our School Improvement Plan. Where are we with this year's plan? What did we say we we're going to do that we're doing? What did we say were going to do that we're not doing? What did we say we were going to do that we wished we had not said?

She goes on to explain that she asked teachers to bring their plans and go through them with her as a source of feedback and feedforward into the system. She concludes, "This is meant to be a positive [experience]—not to point the blame. It's just that sometimes School Improvement Plans (SIP) are just the paper that they're written on. If we're going to get the kids to be where we want them, then we have to be accountable for what's in our School Improvement Plans." This principal saw the SIP as a living document.

Changing Instructional Practices

Changing instructional practices results from ongoing assessment conducted in reading, math, and writing in these schools. Specific skills are taught in relation to grade level expectations and standards. One principal states, "You have to pour through the standards yourself and the grade level expectations, and the performance criteria in order for it to make sense with you and you have to put it on the calendar. So we have worked on it this year and we still have to refine it for next year."

One principal explains that she feels like more of a taskmaster to assure that academics are the total focus of the school. Principals use data gathering tools they develop, or their districts develop, to monitor achievement patterns across the school, by classroom, and by student. Principals speak frequently about conversations with teachers regarding students' performance over time. One principal talked about encouraging her teachers to move beyond the textbook and to teach what is needed rather than following the textbook page by page. Numerous principals discussed how teachers use the textbook as a resource based on what students need to know rather than as "the curriculum."

There is no doubt that assessment is driving instructional practices in schools today. Principals are analyzing and sharing data that is changing how instruction is delivered. Skills are being prioritized and taught from least mastery to most mastery, and skills are grouped together to see if students can apply them to real problems. Further, principals realize they cannot be in every classroom every day. Therefore, it is important to build teacher instructional leaders who assist them in helping other teachers make changes in their instructional practices. One principal spoke of how a math resource teacher is influencing the instructional practices of the entire school. Now there are other schools in the district coming to see what this school is doing in math. Another principal relies on her reading teacher to help teachers move students forward in their reading. She credits this teacher for changing how other teachers assist students to achieve greater literacy. Finally, all of the principals recognize that the teachers are their greatest resources and must be kept abreast of the changes in instructional practices because of standards-based assessment.

To change instructional practices, principals want their teachers to have staff development that is meaningful and can affect the achievement patterns of their school. One principal comments that the teachers are not interested in staff development that will not help them improve their instruction. Further, principals are aware that new teachers face tremendous job challenges in what they have to learn about new programs as well as the state standards. Concerns about how to find the time for more teacher dialogue is ongoing. Additionally, principals want to learn more about how they can improve the language level of poor children and incorporate the best strategies to make learning more authentic.

Principals' Beliefs and Values

Surprisingly, all of the principals interviewed thought that schools should be accountable. Comments such as this one were typical. "[Accountability] ...has us more aware of what we are doing in the classroom. I think it is setting standards and holding people to standards, not only students, but also teachers..." Along with this many of the principals saw that they were becoming instructional leaders. "I have to make sure that every child is getting an adequate dose of academics."

There is a strong recognition of the importance of professional development that builds a community of learners and opens up a shared dialogue with teachers to begin collaborating across the school. Principals realize that this takes time and is the result of building strong relationships rooted in trust and respect. They also describe the importance of building a common language to discuss school improvement. Many of the principals say that they need to model the practices they want their teachers to emulate and they therefore participate in the staff and professional development with their teachers. Visiting classrooms more frequently also allows principals to monitor teaching practices and to conference with teachers as needed. "As an administrator, I believe that my job is to also make my staff successful."

Principals have to do battle to get the resources they need for their schools. This is very wearisome for these principals. This requires using data and having to tell a convincing story about their staff and school needs. Often, there seems to be a plethora of support for the schools when they are an "F." But when the school improves, the support dwindles and principals are left fighting for what they need. These schools are often schools that have been neglected. One principal talks about her fight for five years to get a fence for her school. She states that one of the people in the district told her that schools like hers had been neglected far too long.

Blaming or not blaming parents varied in the comments by principals. The strongest comment about not blaming parents was:

> And we cannot sit here and blame the parents, because there is not a parent that I know of that comes to this school and is in every classroom every day for six hours. I don't care if there's a child that doesn't even

> have a parent in the home, when you get to the school it should be a difference—this should be the home away form home. Like it or not, many of our children live with someone other than their biological parents. See, we can't change that-- that's our demographics.

High-Stakes Testing: Grading the Schools

Principals are not against Florida's accountability system, what causes anger and frustration, they say is the method the state uses to hold schools accountable, as if all schools are the same -- with the same students, the same communities, and the same needs. The resounding agreement, however, is the disapproval of grading schools based on one test, the FCAT. Principals discuss distribution of resources, as it relates to the financial rewards given to schools and teachers, based on school test scores and ultimately the school grades, and the negative impact this has on the schools. Principals speak to high stakes testing and grading schools from the perspective of: *measuring student growth and progress*, *equity*, *using data*, and *impact on schools*.

Measuring Student Growth and Progress

All of the principals agree that the more appropriate measure for accountability is measuring student growth and the progress students make at their own schools. Accountability, they believe, should be fair to all schools, and the way to even the stakes is to hold schools accountable for student growth. It is the concept that "accountability being the same across the board, measuring different students and not the same students or the growth in that same year" that tends to bother these principals. One principal comments:

> I think accountability is essential, but I don't believe that the way it is being done through grades is appropriate or effective. It's taking a simplistic view and doesn't understand growth, hasn't seen the real growth that principals, teachers and children are making in their schools--all these people see is a grade. So, a "D" is poor, but they may have been an "F" school that went up to a "D" school. They have these students that are making monumental growth.

It is the comparison of the same children from year to year and the growth they are experiencing within each school and classroom that makes the accountability system more functional in the eyes of these principals. A principal says it this way.

> If they [the state] said we are going to evaluate you next year and see how you have progressed in your school... But when they start comparing me with schools like the academies and the schools from the middle class and upper middle class neighborhoods, there is just no way we can compare. I mean if you look at their kids who are reading on grade level say fourth or fifth grade level, it is a very high percentage, but at our school it is a very low percentage. Now we are making progress, so if you bring a fourth

> grader from a second grade level up to a say 3.2, in a year, you've made a year and a half year's progress, but they are still behind.

The principals' comments focus on the state's need to recognize and acknowledge that schools and student populations are different, and therefore the accountability system needs to be one that addresses accountability in different ways.

Equity: Comparing Apples and Oranges

Along with being held accountable for growth rather than students just making a score on a test for a school grade, principals want equity in: (1) whom they are compared to and (2) resources. The principals speak of the inequity of the grading system because the state uses "a snapshot" of each 4th and 5th grade group of students which has nothing to do with previous year's 4th and 5th grade students or with the next year's 4th and 5th grade group of children; views all schools as having the same issues and concerns; and does not acknowledge the effects of poverty. One principal articulates this concern.

> The governor says there will be no excuses, and I don't agree with him on minority issues, but the poverty in my mind is the overriding factor. If you have a minority child living in an affluent home, they will score as well as a white child. But if you have a white child living in a poverty-stricken home, they will score as poorly as a minority child. So in my mind it has everything to do with poverty.

Many of the principals' state that students of poverty do make progress and do improve greatly in a year's time. However, these students need more time to acquire skills.

> My problem with the system is the way it has been used against schools with high concentrations of high poverty students. If we could compare apples to apples and orange to oranges, and [by] that I mean look at a group of kids, take a measure and then take that group of kids and look at them again in a year's time and see what growth has taken place... understanding that children do not grow at the same speed and do not acquire skills at the same speed, and taking into consideration children of poverty take longer to acquire skills.

The principals want their schools to be compared, if they have to be, with schools that are "like them."

> If we looked at the students, the students' ethnic group, socioeconomic level especially in the schools as we compare school letter grades. That I think would be a little more equitable; our own schools need to be judged on its own merit, on its own neighborhood, its own population, its own free and reduced rate, its mobility rate.

Many of the principals voice disagreement on how the state rewards schools for improvement. Schools with grades of "A" receive often times a great deal of money based on the number of students in the schools as a direct result of the 4th and 5th grade FCAT scores in reading, math, and writing. Schools are given the task of deciding how to spend these funds. On the other hand, schools with grades of "D" and "F" are not acknowledged in any way for improvement in test scores, but are given funds for teachers who meet the district's requirement for teaching in a "D" or "F" school.

> The other issue I have seen a lot of concern about is the rewarding of monies to schools. That has caused, in this county, lots of splits in faculties, lots of angry words, lots of hurt feelings, and it's a real problem. I'm not sure that is a well thought out plan. I'm not opposed to giving schools monies that are needed for programs, but sometimes the schools that got money are your more affluent schools and you're still sitting over here with a school of high poverty children where their community cannot and will not support them...these schools are not being supported from the beginning and they get nothing.

Principals talk about how the rewarding of money has contributed to teachers expressing discontent by stating they wanted to move to higher graded schools. One principal said that what impacted the school the most was when the state allocated money to "D" schools and not everyone in the building was eligible for the reward. What occurred was staff being pulled apart. "And do you know all I've been hearing since that happened? I think that maybe perhaps I'm going to transfer to an "A" school, because if I transfer to an "A" school we all would have gotten it. In an "A" school all the teachers receive some money." Principals' voices quiver with frustration over how their districts rewarded teachers who worked in "D" of "F" schools. They have many teachers at their schools who should have received the reward, but didn't meet the district criteria...

> And the definition of "outstanding was simply put two ways: you had to get a satisfactory on your evaluation and be in a "D" or "F" school for four years. Well, let me tell you how that impacted us. Some of my very best teachers are teachers that were here three years or less.

Using Data

One positive outcome of the accountability system, in all reports, is the way principals use data. This is a skill many had not been prepared to use and most see this as a positive addition to their professional performance. They report that data are a driving force in whatever they do in improving their school's performance.

> That's the other piece of accountability. It makes us look at data in a different way. The State's accountability, I think, has done that for us. It's not just getting your test scores anymore--it's getting your test scores and what you're doing with them after you have them. It puts me more in

> the role of a data-driven administrator, but you're driving it toward greater [achievement]. So, you can't just get your child's results anymore. When you get them, what are you going to do with them?

Principals talk about not having the tools or the skills to use data in their decision-making. The reasons for this stem from the district not expecting principals to collect and analyze data in the past, not being trained by their districts to analyze data, and/or lacking the tools to collect and analyze data. One principal makes the point that when the district schools were taking the CTBS, the district would send them information, but they didn't know what to do with it, and the district didn't tell them what to do with it. She asserts,

> I never had training about what to do with test results, never. We would get a report, you're a low performing school, so we see our ranking where all the other schools were, and we say O.K. we are a low performing school and we're going to do better next year. And then we would try and do better next year! But, you are fighting the same battle. You didn't know how to change; you didn't know how to target the areas, the children – the individual children that needed change.

Principals relate that they are not only looking at and analyzing test data, they say this new knowledge of data collection and analysis leads them to collect and analyze other data that influences student performance (i.e., attendance, tardiness, homework completion, family information – education of parents, number of parents in the home).

Impact On Schools: Teachers, Students, and Principals

Principals were most passionate when speaking of the impact the grading has had on their students, their teachers, and their communities. Many used the words such as "demoralizing," "devastating," and "destabilizing" when they spoke about how the children and teachers have been affected by the grades. "They know we know that their eyes are watching; we can't afford to let our guards down. You're treading water when you're a "D" because you don't want to fall back on being very critically low. It's the way that it's done that demoralized us."

Another principal states that although the students are meeting minimum standards, what it has done to her school is to destabilize and demoralize the staff. And it has put undo pressure on the children and the families. One principal told the story of the day of the FCAT testing this year when the students got down on their knees and prayed that they would do well. Another principal stated that children wanted to do well on the FCAT because they sensed that it was important to their teachers. The students became "quite ill in the sense – emotionally and anxiety ridden when they took the test." Principals object to the grading, but not to being held accountable. "I don't like the grades (and I go on record saying that again). I don't like grades *per se*, because that is debilitating and debasing at times."

Further, principals talk of the strain and pressure on teachers caused by the state's accountability system, specifically the grading of the schools as a result of student performance on the FCAT. Principals discuss how publicizing the school grades has a negative effect on the students and teachers of low graded schools – "the schools that have made the "F" and the "D" grades and scored really low and gotten all the publicity are the ones that need this kind of criticism the least. These are kids that already come from F lives, F families F neighborhoods. And now the state is saying you are an F student and we are going to show you are an F by publicizing it all over the world."

Principals tell of excellent teachers having to defend themselves at every juncture because of the accountability system.

> Wherever they go, they walk into a party or a situation, and people say, "Oh, you're at so-and-so school --I see you're an "F" school." But along the way as long as they are in a "D" or an "F" school, they are always going to be thought of as being inferior, and that they're always going to be thought of as being incapable of really being a good teacher (which is far from the truth). I think I've mentioned the fact how the system affects our school emotionally. Talking about that, if you are told too often that you are an "F" or "D" person (and everyone has an idea of what an "F" or "D" person is), you start believing it after a while.

Teacher burnout is at an all-time high for teachers of high poverty schools. Principals report that teachers feel the repercussions of the grades by both their peers and community. Principals convey the feeling that the state and districts use scare tactics and intimidation to get all students to the same place with the grading of schools.

> If your school didn't make it, then you were called on the carpet. Now, it went to the State saying that we have to have a certain amount of our students to have certain scores, and if you don't do it, we're going to grade you a "D" or an "F." Then if your school gets an "F" for so many years, even though your kids are improving and even though they are coming from disadvantaged communities and do not have the same wherewithal, we consider the average standard that we would want. If they're not improving in the three years time that the State wants, then you're going to be "spanked," and told the school will be taken away from the district, etc. They used all these scare tactics and what it amounted to was that they believed that we were incompetent.

It is the message that "we're not competent" that disturbs these principals because their teachers are working harder and getting no reinforcement from the state, district or community for what they are accomplishing.

Recruitment and Retention

One of the major obstacles the principals identify is recruitment and retention of teachers. Recruitment is a problem because many teachers do not want to teach in high poverty schools with at-risk students. So, they don't apply. One principal notes, "with my school being an older school, an "F" school, a small school, hard to teach kids -- I'm not the first one people apply to. I feel like the cream-of-the-crop teachers are swallowed up by the academies and by the new schools." Those who do tend to apply are often those teachers beginning their careers in teaching or those who can't get hired by the more affluent, less diverse populated schools. Then there is the problem of retaining those effective teaches who do teach at the high poverty, diverse schools. There are many reasons teachers leave schools, but poverty schools tend to have a higher teacher mobility rate for a variety of reasons. And the students, students of poverty, are often difficult to work with because they often come to schools lacking academic and social skills and requiring much more than students from more affluent schools. "It is easier to work in an "A" graded school than it is to work in a "D" graded school. Teachers come here, they get the training--we do a good job of training teachers in this area, an excellent job of training. As soon as they become expert teachers, they become very attractive to other schools," as one principal shares. Add to those difficulties the grading of schools, and teachers and principals find it difficult to maintain the energy and consistency necessary to be successful in these schools every day for extended periods of time. Principals report that because of the way the state holds poverty schools accountable in the same manner as the more affluent schools, the schools are not attracting and retaining the best and the brightest teachers. "School demographics alone -- the school location, and the housing", principals report, "often make it even more difficult to recruit and retain your best and brightest." In addition to teachers moving or leaving the profession, principals share knowledge of how their peers as well as themselves are either leaving for higher graded schools or leaving the profession altogether. Principals share their perspectives on retention and recruitment with reference to three areas*: veteran teachers' attitudes: terminating ineffective teachers, teacher and principal mobility,* and, *training ground for teachers.*

Veteran Teachers' Attitudes: Terminating Ineffective Teachers

As a result of the standards, high-stakes testing of those standards, and grading, veteran teachers' are faced with the need to change attitudes and instruction in order to meet the state's accountability requirements. Many of the teachers in these schools have been at the school for many years and have their own ideas of what students of poverty can do and need as far as instruction. These teachers often do not recognize that children are different today. A principal says, "What we can't quite get them to understand is children are different than they were 30 years ago." Several of the principals tell stories of how the demographics of the school changed, but teachers failed to change with them.

> Most of them are tenured teachers, but have been teaching a number of years, and the population of this school has changed, and they did not change with it. They want to do things they did them 20 years ago or when

> they first began teaching. They do not embrace the changes that are occurring around them.

Along with the difficulty of changing attitudes and instructional practices of veteran teachers, many of the principals reported the frustration of having teachers in their schools that were not meeting the academic needs of the students and with low school grades looming over their heads, principals could not sit back and wait to see if these teachers were going to come around. " It forced me to terminate some people that I might have let hang around a little longer and given them a little more time to improve. I can't have crummy teachers here."

Terminating these ineffective teachers leads to mounds of paperwork and documentation that these principals have little time to complete. The district leaders, often times, do little to assist principals in removing ineffective teachers which leads to frustration and creative problem solving for the principals.

> My hardest group of staff here has been my "X" team. They are all very veteran, and they refuse to change. That is the weak link at this school. Outside of firing them, which would have been horrendous process because of their years [of experience] and I probably would never have been able to do it--they're not going to change for anyone. I could never find a way to change it, or motivate them to change their minds. And outside of firing them, which in this district is very, very difficult when you talk about a really long-term veteran, I don't know how they're going to do it. And it becomes a decision sometimes for principals which grade level am I going to assign this teacher to, so they can be of greatest benefit, to where am I going to put them so they'll be of least harm.

One principal who has only been a principal for the last four years tells the story of coming to the school and realizing there were teachers who were minimal at best and the school had just received an "F" grade.

> It has been hard. When I came here, I had some teachers here that were not doing the job. But they have been here forever and I have not been able to move them. I am finally this year, and the district office is helping me with this, moving the last two that I feel like are less than minimal[ly] performing teachers. So I can get rid of them. If I could have come in here and said I need to clean house and I need these kind of teachers, it would have been a lot easier and a lot quicker and I think I would've gotten a lot more to stay.

Not only do these principals have difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers, they often have to fight the district to keep qualified, trained teachers due to loss of units. Many of the principals speak of "battling" the district to get what they need to serve their student population.

Teacher and Principal Mobility: Teacher Principal Decision and or District Decision

Another area that principals talk about with passion is teacher mobility. There is a concern for the high mobility of teachers, whether it is teacher-driven or district-driven. More times than not, the principals report teachers leave the school and transfer to other schools because working at a high poverty school graded "D" or "F" is difficult. One principal states, "sometimes the issues that teachers deal with on a day-to-day basis are just so overwhelming because of the cultural mismatch, because of the expectations--just a number of things that simply overwhelm them because they don't know what to expect. I think that if we could get teachers properly trained and sensitize many of them to the issues the children that they are trying to teach have, we could make greater strides."

This same principal discusses attrition:

> We are seeing teachers who are beginning in lower socioeconomic schools, but then moving to other schools because it is just a little bit easier and the challenges just aren't as great and they are also leaving education. I've had two teachers within the last two months leave education to do something else--and the past couple years this has been pretty much standard.

Principals talk of how hard they work to keep effective teachers, and how high poverty schools are turning out good teachers because accountability forces the teachers to improve. However, it is a double-edge sword. "Because what happens when they leave here, they're good teachers. And the first time they interview at another school, they're gone because they know how to teach in any of our at-risk schools."

One principal shares her frustrations with peers because they often discourage teachers and that have lost positions in not going to a school that is graded "D" or "F." She says, "But, the hard part is getting them here, you know, and often times it is my peers...a peer will say, 'why do you want to go to X, you know if I were you I'd go over here.' I know I didn't get an AP applicant when the job was open because her principal said, 'why would you want to go to an F school? Think how hard that's going to be.'"

Principals convey stories about themselves and other colleagues who are having second thoughts of leading schools with such high needs. One principal tells a story of a colleague who just had enough with the system.

> She has 30 something years in; she has a wonderful reputation with everybody. She is not one to shove off work or give up work, or give up, but she has been trying to fight a battle. And she is in a high poverty school, high migrant and it is impossible if you cannot carry out your vision, your dream you just can't do it. And I think she said, and she did, she told someone, I don't have to put up with this, I'm out of here and she left, and she's gone and that school is without leadership.

The stories relate to frustration not with the students, but with the system – being compared to schools with an "A" grade that are in affluent communities or being ridiculed by the media.

> Does it make me want to say, okay I'm going to stay here because I don't mind being brow-beaten, and I don't mind having my name in the paper and having people think I'm incompetent as an administrator (even though I know I'm not and even though I know my teachers aren't)? So, what happens with most administrators is that you don't want to continue that battle every year, and so you start looking for a school that's going to be an "A" or "B" school.

Training Ground for Teachers: Encouraging and Supporting

Because "D" and "F" schools, high poverty schools particularly, have difficulty retaining teachers, these schools also tend to have high numbers of beginning teachers, first year teachers or teachers new to the district or school itself. The principals report that they have many beginning teachers every year in which they must acculturate them into the school, and train them on the different academic programs at the school, as well as the district programs.

> I have a hard time getting staff. I've just checked my statistics and I lose about ¼ of my teachers every year. They go for one reason or another. I don't know if it's stress over the grade; I don't know whether it's just being at the school, the stress at teaching at a this kind of school; I don't know if they want to be closer to home. I guess it is all of those, but when you are constantly in the training mode with your staff it is really hard to get ahead.

Principals recognize the work it takes to teach students who often show limited progress, yet there is progress, and the excessive wear and tear on teachers. "Our kids don't make progress in leaps and bounds. It is small baby steps, and if you can't measure those small baby steps as you go along then you think you are not doing anything. It wears the teachers down and burns them out." Many of the principals stress that a large part of their job is providing support, encouragement, and protecting their teachers. "As a principal, I have to go back and always say to the teachers, what you're doing is right, what you're doing is good, this is going to work." Principals relate situations where more and more they find that they must build teachers' confidence and lift spirits and morale.

> And then you have teachers who first of all have been branded an F, so they are not feeling good about themselves to begin with and you are coming along and telling them they are not doing the right thing so we are going to change everything you are doing an do it this way, it wrecks their self concept unless you are doing a lot to build it up as you are doing these things.

Principals echo the frustration of training and supporting teachers only to lose them to other more affluent, less difficult schools. One principal comments," They [the other schools] don't have to worry about taking new teachers because we train them all here!

Several of the principals voice their interest in developing and nurturing teacher leaders through professional development and coaching. Principals share that this is what will sustain their schools, even if the principal should leave the school.

> So developing that teacher leadership part of a school function is incredibly powerful. I want to build the capacity in them that when a new administrator comes in who's not very nice or who treats them poorly, that they can just stand right up and say, "No, here's the way we do things around here. This is what works here, and this is the way we're going to do it." Now, I would like to teach them how to do that because they're not going to do anything wrong, they're just going to try to always do things right.

Another principal comments:

> I have spent this entire year I've been here, these months that I've been here trying to build teacher leaders and to identify them, you have to nurture them, you have to put them in a position they can become a teacher leader, and they have to build credibility with their peers. And that is what we have spent some time doing this year.

Teachers and principals are often battered and worn down as a result of the grading and publicizing of the grades. One principal shares, "I work with them [teachers] in supporting them to make them know that I knew they were competent, no matter what the newspapers said." Retaining teachers in high poverty schools graded "D" and "F", it seems, requires teacher training along with principal encouragement and support.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The themes identified were (1) effects of poverty, (2) building organizational capacity, (3) high stakes testing: grading the schools, and (4) recruitment and retention. The principals proclaim how serving as a principal in Florida's high poverty/minority schools today is riveted with continual pressures to increase student performance and meet the state and district mandates, while supporting and encouraging their teachers and students. Because these principals are from schools with very diverse populations, they believe the issues they face everyday are unlike those of their more affluent peers in schools with less diversity.

As reported, principals are not against Florida's standards or accountability system. They aren't really against the FCAT. What they are against, however, is the inequity of the method of high-stakes testing to compare students with different needs (high poverty

versus more affluent schools) in the grading of schools. The overriding perception is their students are at a disadvantage when taking the high-stakes test because they come from economically, educationally, and culturally disadvantaged home environments, unlike the students of more affluent schools that they are being compared to as a result of the grading system. They passionately argue that measuring student growth is a more equitable way to measure student progress. Principals unanimously believe that schools like theirs, with high-risk students from poverty, and where English is a second language, need more time to bring their students where they need to be, and that educators should be recognized for the progress their students make in a year's time.

It is not just about teaching standards and increasing test scores. The Florida standards, assessed by the FCAT, as other state standards, require the students to engage in complex thinking and problem-solving proficiencies. To help students meet these standards, teachers must improve their own instructional practices and pedagogy (Kohn, 2001). Little (1999) outlines how school leaders can create a learning environment for teachers by following five guidelines (1) Make collective inquiry into student learning the heart of professional development; (2) Organize daily work to support teacher learning; (3) Develop alternative approaches to teacher learning; (4) Provide feedback on student learning; and (5) Develop an ethos that supports teacher learning. Several of the principals recognize the importance of creating an environment where teachers have time to study and learn more about the teaching-learning process. Building organizational capacity is a concept that many of the principals have failed to completely grasp, with its potential to impact and alter student performance patterns.

Principals do recognize, however, that their schools are concentrating more on short-term rather than long-term change due to the urgency of increasing their "D" or "F" letter grades. They acknowledge that schools must work on both short-tem and long term goals simultaneously or they will never catch up and will always be "fighting the same battle." Faced with the urgency to increase test scores to improve "the grade," schools tend to focus on reading, writing, and math, often to the exclusion of the arts, science, social studies, and physical education. Kohn, delivering the General Session at the ASCD's 2000 Conference on Teaching and Learning, referred to a school that narrows its focus of teaching and learning to improving test scores as "a lifeless place that isn't intellectually vibrant. It doesn't even succeed on its own terms of [fostering] real academic achievement. It's not about academic achievement; it's about higher test scores" (p. 4, Education Update, 2001). The principals interviewed would agree, but they believe they are caught in a "catch 22" situation -- improve test scores to increase the letter grade. This creates a conflict for the principals – to do what is best for the children and provide a learning environment where they get what they need or "drill and kill" so they will improve the test scores that will improve the school grade!

Because district staff must interpret state policy for their districts, often times, mandates "come down from the top" that result in principals feeling threatened and/or intimidated. Schools graded "D" or "F" especially feel this because of the position they are in being recognized as "low performing schools." Several of the principals from schools graded "F" were faced with the threat of being removed from their positions if their school grade

didn't improve at least one letter grade for the 1999-2000 school year (one principal was removed from one "D" school to be placed in another "D" school when the grade of the school did not change). Given this feeling of scare tactics and intimidation, as one principal describes them, many voice frustration on a perceived lack of district support, both in financial and human resource terms. In most cases, the principals report that the district personnel added more stress and work rather than support. In a time when most of these principals needed support, they walked the tightrope of high-stakes testing and accountability without a net. But not all of the principals felt like that. Several felt that their districts were there whenever they called them for support.

Today, teacher recruitment and retention is a major concern for educators. It is even more of a problem for high poverty schools graded "D" or "F." We have learned that principals must "battle," they say, ineffective teachers, veteran teachers' attitudes, training beginning teachers, and high teacher mobility within a climate of intense public scrutiny. Effective teachers, which are present in low performing schools contrary to public opinion, are overwhelmed and burned out under the weight of their commitment to meet the needs of their high poverty students. These teachers shoulder the burden because they care and want to make a difference in the lives of children who start school academically and experientially less prepared than their counterparts in more affluent schools. It is this weight of the accountability and high-stakes testing that causes effective teachers to leave the profession. This is not because they don't want to be held accountable. It is a direct result of the conflict of asking students to perform on a test that they are not "ready" to take, but could be in time with the appropriate instructional strategies, deep content, and learning experiences. The principals interviewed repeatedly gave examples of losing teachers to other professions and schools as a result of the frustration.

Principals "fight" districts for more teachers to reduce class size, and add facilitators in the key areas of reading, math, and writing. Literature on class size varies from study to study, however, the common theme is that when teachers use appropriate strategies that engage students in the learning process, class size impacts student achievement. Principals question why their districts do not support them in endeavors such as this.

Examining the perceptions of principals' from "low performing" high poverty/minority elementary schools through the lens of the effects of poverty, building organizational capacity, high stakes testing: grading the schools, and recruitment and retention of teachers and principals gives educators a better understanding how principals' view themselves as leaders under the graded system, particularly within high poverty/minority school contexts, and explored how the graded designations impacted principals' professional identities and relationships with various role groups.

The challenge for principals is to reconcile the internal needs of their schools with the external accountability measures, while simultaneously building organizational capacity. One of the principals in the study described the commitment to working in high poverty/minority schools as a missionary zeal. Certainly the leadership challenges are exacerbated when schools become dumping grounds for ineffective teachers or inexperienced principals.

Our recommendations are several. First, policy makers must begin to look at schools that are high poverty differently. They need more resources, district and state support, and the best teachers and administrators placed in the schools. Further, we recommend a consortium be established for principals from high poverty schools across the state to become a forum for sharing best practices. Additionally, teachers and principals in high needs schools should be paid more for their work, which we concur is more demanding. Lastly, we offer a final caveat for consideration. It seems to us that most principals were comfortable discussing poverty-related issues. However, none of the principals discussed the inequities of poverty and race that seem to go hand-in-hand in our culture. It is our great concern that if states do not become more committed to altering the life success patterns for all children, particularly children of color and in poverty, our nation is in great peril. The only way we can begin to level the playing field is to create more shared responsibility and accountability systems in our schools and greater community involvement. This means making a concerted effort to insure that the necessary opportunities and resources are available to people, so as Dewey (1966) advised, people can participate fully in a political and social cultural life. For to continue to systematically deny access to groups of students through neglecting to translate the rules of the middle class into high expectations for their success is antithetical to our democracy. Educators, policy-makers, and communities must make a renewed commitment to improve schools for all poor and minority students. Does it take a lot of effort and special people? The answer is "yes."

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